
***MORE QUARRIES FROM
LAST CHANCE GULCH***

Brother Van inspired by Campus's great potential

As we examined in the first article of this series on the history of the Van Orsdel Memorial building in the Helena valley, the Rev. William Wesley Van Orsdel had returned to the former site of Montana Wesleyan University on the corner of Montana Avenue and Sierra Road East in 1906, to find the abandoned campus in a serious state of disrepair. Yet Brother Van was not discouraged by the sight, but inspired.

He saw great potential in the campus and, after leasing 14 acres of the property from Montana Wesleyan University, he began to refurbish and remodel the vacant administration building and the grounds into a boarding school and safe-house for children. With the sponsorship of the Methodist Church and the generous help of local Helenans, the 56-room administration building in the Prickly Pear Valley was renovated to include more bedrooms, bathrooms, and parlors, as well as a cafeteria and a chapel for \$3000.

The "Deaconess Preparatory School" was incorporated on July 3, 1909, and opened its doors on September 14 to nine pupils. The formal name was soon changed to the "Montana Deaconess School for Children," and for several years, it remained the only non-sectarian institution of its kind west of the Mississippi River. It admitted students "of good moral character" who were under the age of fourteen and who had not yet completed the eighth grade. The Deaconess school sought to provide

disadvantaged children with the opportunity of home and educational training. Tuition, board, room, heat, and lights for students averaged \$20 per month between 1909 and 1920.

After Brother Van's death in 1919, the Rev. John Chirgwin of Helena began a movement to establish a memorial building in Rev. Van Orsdel's honor on the Deaconess campus in the valley. The success of the school required its expansion, and Rev. Chirgwin saw an opportunity to fulfill the need for a new building with an appropriate tribute to the school's founder.

He quickly received authorization for the construction and began a state-wide campaign to raise the needed \$100,000 for the building. A groundbreaking ceremony was held during the summer of 1920, following the approval of building plans submitted by architect S.F. Carsley.

By July of 1921, Rev. Chirgwin had raised nearly \$58,000, despite such obstacles as a severe drought and an industrial depression. On July 24, in the presence of members of the Grand Lodge of Masons, friends of the Montana Deaconess School, and state government officials, the cornerstone was laid for the Van Orsdel Memorial building.

Within the cornerstone, such items as a 1915 Deaconess School yearbook and bulletins of the Deaconess School and Montana Wesleyan University were placed. The planned 2 1/2-story structure would be composed of brick, tile and concrete and would house dormitory rooms, classrooms, and a large auditorium with a balcony and stage.



Work on the New Van Orsdel Memorial building was nearly completed in the fall of 1935 when disaster struck. (IR photo by Gene Fischer)

Hard times just have fallen upon the Methodist Church and the Montana Deaconess School during the 1920s, because construction of the Van Orsdel Memorial building progressed at a very slow pace, taking nearly 15 years to approach the final building phases. In addition to the extended period of construction, the building that was constructed was immensely scaled-down in both size and design from the original building proposed by Architect Carsley.

The original building design called for a much more stately appearance exhibiting a variety of architectural influences. Although the exact reasons for the altered appearance of the building are not documented, new drawings, perhaps those of the present building, were submitted and approved in August of 1922.

Funding was such a problem for the school in the closing period of this decade, that Rev. Chirgwin journeyed to the east coast during the winter of 1926-27 to solicit help from such prominent individuals as Mrs. Marcus Daly, Mrs. Conrad Kohrs, and senators Thomas J. Walsh and Burton K. Wheeler.

Work on the building was nearly completed in the fall of 1935 when disaster struck. Two large earthquakes measuring 6.0 and 6.25 in magnitude struck Helena on October 18 and October 31, respectively.

The epicenter of the quakes occurred very near the Deaconess School on the Prickly Pear fault line in the Helena valley, causing irreparable damage to the administration building and destroying the roof and upper story of the new Van Orsdel Memorial building.

Consequently, the Montana Deaconess School abandoned the campus for temporary quarters at a nearby farm. In 1937, the school moved into town and after several years was transformed into the present Intermountain Childrens' Home located at 500 South Lamborn.

Following the earthquakes of 1935, the administration building was demolished for safety purposes. The Van Orsdel Memorial building was left standing, but has remained vacant to this day, despite its apparent structural soundness.

A neighborhood grocery store was built near the site of the former administration building not long after the earthquakes. This grocery store was purchased by Pepper Martin in 1962, and Martin's IGA remains in the shadow of the abandoned building. In spite of an uncertain future, the Van Orsdel Memorial building still stands as a silent sentinel in the Helena valley - a tribute to the unselfish devotion of the Rev. William Wesley Van Orsdel and to the greatness of two of Montana's first educational and public service institutions.

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